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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001875

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SUBJECT: PRESENTATION OF DRAFT IRAQI CONSTITUTION AND  
ALGERIAN REACTION

REF: STATE 158420

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, called on FM Bedjaoui August 31 to deliver reftel demarche urging strong support for the Iraqi people, the democratic process in Iraq, and the October 15 referendum on the draft Iraqi constitution. Ambassador reviewed the talking points in some detail, providing the Secretary's statement on the new constitution, the fact sheet on highlights of the constitution, and the English language text. Ambassador said that as an international jurist, the Foreign Minister would find the document of interest. While the new constitution was neither perfect nor final -- any more than the U.S. Constitution has been in its initial form -- it was on the whole an impressive achievement and the product of wide debate, dialogue, and compromise. It was progressive in its protection of individual, women's, and minority rights and realistic in seeking to balance religious, democratic, and human rights principles.

¶2. (C) Ambassador stressed that a genuine political process was underway and that the Iraqi people should be strongly encouraged to continue on this path. While some Sunnis were not happy with aspects of the document, their views were not necessarily reflective of all Sunnis. The important thing was that all Iraqis, including all Iraqi Sunnis, would have an opportunity on October 15 to express their views democratically in the constitutional referendum and that political differences should be resolved through the political process, not through recourse to violence or terror. We strongly hoped our partners and friends would provide this kind of encouragement.

¶3. Bedjaoui indicated that Algeria wanted to see the democratic process in Iraq move forward. At the same time, he noted concerns among Iraqi Sunnis that the natural resources were not equally distributed within Iraq, thus raising fears among the Sunnis that if the country broke apart, they would be left with nothing. Ambassador said the draft constitution made very clear that Iraq's natural resources were the property of all Iraqis. Furthermore, we had found that some Sunni negotiators who had been publicly critical of the constitution were much more ambivalent in private -- a point that seemed to be of special interest to the Minister. Iraqi Sunnis and everyone else would have an opportunity to express themselves in the October referendum. If there were things they did not like, they needed to work within the political process to fix them, just as was the case with the many other compromises that had been reached during the constitutional drafting process.

¶4. (C) Bedjaoui, noting the bridge tragedy that had taken the lives of hundreds of Iraqis earlier in the day, expressed great sympathy for the Iraqi people and their troubles. Algeria wanted to see the democratic process move forward in Iraq and the terrible daily violence end. In this context, he noted, Sunnis expected to be able to participate fully in the political process in Iraq. Holding the referendum with all the Sunnis voting against the constitution would indeed be an "extraordinary event." It would be the first time such a situation occurred in Iraq's history, and it would be dangerous if Kurds and Shi'a supported the constitution while Sunnis did not. Even if the constitution were approved by a "sufficient majority," different perceptions of the rights and obligations of Iraqi citizens could cause a split. Bedjaoui agreed it was important to convince the Sunnis to go forward with this current phase and to revisit certain decisions at a later time. Despite their frustrations, they needed to be patient.

ERDMAN